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ABSTRACT

The head of the writing center at Rollins College, in an attempt to develop a metaphor for the writing center turned to peer writing consultants. Their suggested metaphors structure an essay about what a writing center should be: a community of consultants and clients working together, respectful of diversity, originality, tolerant of differences. What is a writing center after all, if not the ultimate illustration of that democratic diversity that scholars so value in literature and composition studies? The peer tutors themselves represent a wide range of disciplines, skills, and talents; a melting pot of the best the institution can offer. Moreover, the training and experience with clients give tutors a healthy sense of ownership, making them responsible for the center and responsive to campus needs. Their own take-over, then, speeds the democratization of literacy as they interact with fellow students to create widening circles of support for writing, reading, and responding. A further goal of peer training is to make the tutors professionals--they read scholarship, conduct their own research, and even participate in the evolution of courses. The colleagues at the writing center are also engaged in a human endeavor; the strength of their discipline lies in its interactive character. (TB)

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The Best of Where We're Going: The Writing Center as Metaphor of the Community of English Studies

The theme for this year's conference cried out for a metaphor appropriate to my vision of our discipline, the study of reading and writing, the mediation of text. Stuck, I did what I always do: talked it over with a peer writing consultant in the Rollins Writing Center. During our invention session we spoke of the discipline as being welcoming, enabling, empowering individuals by introducing them to discourse in ways which will enrich their lives and multiply what they are able to think and to articulate.

"Well, but you can't just open the doors of academe," Janet Bessmer, the peer consultant remarked, "walk in and say, 'I'm here. Where's my discourse group?'" As she so ably reminded me, the Writing Center is the initiation level into the possibilities of college discourse, the place where conversation begins. But as the campus focus for an ethos of writing, our Centers are actually so much more. Properly conceived, the Writing Center can both stand for and reenact the values of our profession. As models of collaboration and support, bastions of high expectations for writing and responding to texts, they serve as analogue for English Studies in the best and broadest contexts. (And so the Writing Center as metaphor bowed politely and allowed me to go on with this paper.)

But once I got into the metaphor mode, it was sort of hard to slip back out. So as I began to conceive of the Writing Center as metaphor, it was natural to conceive of this paper

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itself as a series of metaphors written by our peer writing consultants, five-minute exercises in my tutor-training class. Here's what Suzy had to say:

> The Writing Center's a box of assorted Krispy Kreme doughnuts, some sweet, some nutty, some spicy, some sour. Before our arrival we were each a ball of dough with the potential of being a tasty treat. Twila and all of us have helped each other add the cinnamon, sugar, coconut, nuts--whatever ingredients we chose to make us all so tasty and different. Almost always we taste good, but we get stale if we close our box and hide ourselves in the corner for too long.
>
> Suzy Heidacher

Suzy's lighthearted depiction of diversity, originality, the tolerance and celebration of difference is an apt illustration of English Studies. In literature, after all, we may once have had a "traditional canon," but to that we've added and generally insist upon the inclusion of women's literature, minority literature, gay literature, third-world literature. In the teaching of writing we've examined, for example, issues of gender and language, cultural variations in such matters as essay structure, studies in learning styles or personality traits as they relate to the composing process.

And what is a Writing Center, after all, if not the ultimate illustration of that democratic diversity we so value in literature and composition studies? The peer tutors themselves represent a wide range of disciplines, a host of skills and talents, a melting pot of the best the institution can offer. Certainly the tutors can represent cultural diversity, people of color, ethnic and religious minorities, students whose first language is not English. But even at a campus such as Rollins, where cultural

diversity is somewhat limited, where no more than a quarter of our peer writing consultants at any one time represent such a range, personal diversity is still unlimited. Thus, in selecting our staff from a number of organizations and disciplines and interests, we may still hope for variety, and I know I've achieved it when the peer consultants note that they would surely never have spoken together had it not been for the Writing Center. This we accomplish too when we select from a range of learning styles, being certain that consultants are aware of differences between right-brained and left-brained writing strategies, that they can work with introverts and extroverts and clients who test all over the sixteen possibilities represented in the Myers Briggs Type Indicator scales. In learning to interact with each other in training and staff meetings, these students learn to work with clients as well, thereby modelling the strengths of a diverse culture. Jonathan, another peer consultant, summarized this point in a conference presentation of his own:

> I guess diversity is really the different ways of reacting towards people we <u>perceive</u> as being unlike ourselves. Diversity has to do with our personalities, our values, our learning styles, how we see the world, how we relate to each other.
>
> Jonathan Chisdes

Moreover, training and experience with clients give tutors a healthy sense of ownership, making them responsible for the Center and responsive to campus needs. Their own take-over, then, speeds the democratization of literacy as they interact

with fellow students to create widening circles of support for writing, reading, responding. For the Rollins peer writing consultants, sixteen hours of crash training is followed by weekly staff meetings throughout the academic year, as our credit-bearing course is stretched over two semesters. Here we make use of personal writing and exploration to consider issues of client vulnerability, approaches to invention, methods of structuring, the values of digging deeper, appropriate research techniques, the tools of collaboration, the need for a passionate commitment to the subject (or at least to the writing).

A further goal of our training is make the peer writing consultants professionals. Thus, they read scholarship in composition studies, conduct their own research through the papers they write, and even participate in the evolution of courses. (Indeed, one consultant kept a collaborative journal with me last term, and in an extension of that Advanced Consultancy course, he and two others are participating with me in a small collaborative class to determine how far we can push our own resources through the flexible medium of the journal.) More than forty of our peer writing consultants have also spoken at professional conferences to date.

Certainly such activity affects the peer consultants' interaction with clients, but they are still students working with students. And as such they model a new way for professors to interact as well. Surely in English Studies we have been leaders in collaboration, seeing ourselves as learners among

learners, striving to collaborate in opening up the text we examine jointly with our classes. When peer tutors collaborate with clients, they naturally model a sense of equality, of two minds exploring an idea together. As the authority on the writing, they allow the client to retain authority over the idea, the content. Such ownership enables the client to go far, to explore more deeply, to control and direct and rechannel the idea until s/he has come to possess it, to understand it entirely. The learning is not disrupted by the imposition of "a higher authority" in the form of teacher or scholar or text.

My own experience in consulting with our peer writing consultants (as I've been doing throughout the preparation of this text) is that they force me to draw upon all the resources I've already collected in my head and on the papers and notes I've spread around the computer. Only when they've convinced me to push my idea to its limit do they then suggest--inevitably--"Is there some more reading you should be doing before you finish this?" This model for supportive collaboration, for teasing through an idea and then pushing the client back to the resources, has been noted with surprise by faculty across our curriculum, who not only send their students in for such consultations, but sometimes come themselves as well.

When collaboration occurs in the midst of such diversity as our Writing Centers (and indeed English Studies) represent, it suggests another value we share. We are engaged here in a human endeavor, and the strength of our discipline lies in its interac-

tive character. Consider Betsy's metaphor for the Writing Center:

> The Writing Center is a great wagonwheel, with a hub in the middle and long spokes (the peer consultants) extending out from Twila at the center. We revolve around and around, making forward progress throughout the year. The rim of the wheel is all the work we've helped to create: students' papers and our own writing. The wheel wouldn't work if one of the spokes were missing, and if the hub weren't strong, it would all fall apart. Everything we do is cyclical like the wheel, but no matter how many times we repeat what we do, we are always riding forward.
>
> Betsy Hill

Perhaps our discipline does not always appear to be so richly interactive in the way Betsy illustrates in her metaphor of the wheel. We go so many directions, after all, and how seldom we seem to agree with our colleagues! Yet diversity is a measure of strength that need not undermine the humanity of our endeavors. It is, after all, the push and pull of one critical theory against another, the rubbing of alternative readings of a text together, which illuminate and help us comprehend the fabric we examine. And our very urging of students to read the text again, to examine conflicting critics, to heed the professings of more than one teacher--our drawing our students into the complexities of interpretation are our means of celebrating the interaction which makes the text whole. As we draw students into our literary discourse through classroom interaction, peer group activities, shared papers, and Writing Center activity, we encourage them to learn the pleasures of making meaning in a complicated universe.

This same interaction, of course, is the hallmark of our Writing Centers, where tutors and clients alike learn the very human skills which will carry them far beyond their brief lives on our campuses. I think Lori explained better than I could just before she graduated:

> Yes, I got more than I bargained for. From the very first training session, I sensed an inadequacy within myself. That beginning showed me what I didn't know, what I'd have to learn, how to interact with people, regularly, consistently. What I did not envision, though, was the resulting personal growth, sharing with other writers, reading literature in a new way with other readers, gaining some sense (however obscure) that what I'm doing is important. Admitting my work's importance to myself allowed me to help others value their work, allowed me to become excited seeing another writer progress in her thinking and in her writing.
>
> I love the gleam in my client's face at the end of a consultation. They're so happy that someone cared enough to read their writing, and, more importantly, to offer clear, constructive criticism. Encouragement and applause too. Not all of them are the same, and I change myself to fit their individual personalities and needs. Me flexible? Who would have ever thought it?
>
> Lori Sordyl

But we're more than interactive; we're eclectic as well. Anyone who has ever taught a literature class knows how unlikely it is to get through the hour without making some use of history or mythology, religion or philosophy, sociology or politics, even economics or the sciences. (You can't teach the Victorians without using all of the above!) Thus, English Studies draws on other disciplines. Yet it is accessible to them as well; for through our work both in research and in the classroom, students gain the means of access to other discourse communities. Through us, they learn to read and write, honing the strategies they will

need to succeed throughout their college careers. . .and indeed, their lives. Again the Writing Center is an apt analogue, as Bill's metaphor clearly demonstrates:

> The Writing Center is a bus driving through the city every day. Some passengers you can set your clock by. Sometimes they sit for a long time in the back of the bus, and eventually no one will sit near them! They're integral parts of the whole system. The driver (a peer consultant) changes nearly as often as the passengers; it all depends on the schedule and which street the bus is on. Some passengers get on the bus for a short trip. Others, like those in the back, will be back again tomorrow.
>
> Bill Hyde

And so the Writing Center is available to a host of "passengers" on a number of journeys to distant locations. It furthers the discourse of all academic disciplines, by enabling all students to enter into the conversation to the best of their abilities. But it is eclectic in its services as well, for faculty across disciplines assign writing for diverse purposes representing a range of academic discourses and expectations. Through workshops and faculty writers' support groups in the Writing Center, we learn from each others' disciplines and begin to collaborate on research and teaching. And in addressing the writing needs of our colleagues, we encourage their assigning the Writing Center for all their students as well. Working together, then, we all perceive the possibilities of the emerging text, until the reading intertwines with the writing, merging the two strands of our discipline. As we share this perception with our colleagues, the significance of <u>our</u> work comes to be understood too.

Closely related to this eclecticism is accessibility. We all know the horror stories of disciplines with "flunk-out courses" intended to weed out the underprepared. And every campus has its truisms of where help is most available on campus, or which disciplines offer help in teaching to newer colleagues. Without denigrating colleagues in any discipline, let me just note that English Studies has been an <u>open</u> field, an area in which we've researched the strategies of learning and discovered the means of making literacy at a fairly high level of sophistication accessible to every student who sought it. Starting with the veterans of the fifties, through the open admission students of the sixties, to the diverse body of students we serve today, we've worked hard to admit everyone to some level of our own discourse community.

Julie's metaphor for the Writing Center shows the same principle at work:

> The Writing Center is like a swimming pool. Some consultants jump right in without the fear of depth. Some sit on the side, dangling their feet, wondering whether or not to let the experience become worthwhile. Others walk halfway in and discover their own ways of adjusting to the temperature.
>
> Julie Hoyt

The Writing Center's accessibility is increased, of course, with much advertising, an inviting environment, student posters around, a few All-Nighters, free coffee and popcorn, students' rights to free expression, a little zaniness, and a campus ethos which proclaims that <u>all</u> writers (not just "bad ones") bring their writing to peers for a second opinion.

But most of all, I believe our discipline is demanding. No small goals for us: we hope to transform all those who come in contact with us into better people--deeper thinkers, more thoughtful readers, richer writers, more contemplative selves who draw complex connections to the world. That is to say, we set very high expectations for writing and for responding to texts, whether they be the published products of polished writers or the drafts in progress of our own students and colleagues.

Here is William's whimsical rendition of our Writing Center exacting the same high demands:

> Maybe we are like a great big complex hydrocarbon, with a clearly defined center, but lots of little branches shooting off. And, as with any molecule, everything is both stable and unstable. Atomic particles are constantly in motion, but the basic shape and function of the molecule remains constant. The molecule does, however, react with the outside world. So I guess it is constantly changing, for these reactions change its shape, its structure. Instead of being a 2, 4 orthodichloryltwilanol, it becomes a 3, 6 paradichloryltwilanol. But it still does the same thing, basically. And those little branches shooting off from the center, they have a curious degree of freedom. They can cut loose from the center if they wish. They can also return, for the center of the organism is warm and forgiving--although also very demanding. It's not every little organic entity that can take being a part of the Writing Center carbohydrate.
>
> William Bartlett

But the demands in the Writing Center do not all come from the person in charge. . .nor from fellow peer consultants. From the clients we learn to stretch our talents and read new materials and consider odd patterns and adopt fresh options. The infinite multiplicity of our clients. . .their varying needs, skills, commitments, composing processes, demands, hopes,

assignments, projects. . .indeed, the very texts themselves. . .all demand a response that is flexible, eclectic, contrary even. Responding to our clients and their texts is both a celebration of diversity and an exercise in interacting with ideas, defining discourse expectations, mediating possibilities, and translating potentials. Indeed, the peer tutor must negotiate (and renegotiate) meaning between the professor and the student by interpreting professors' assignments, students' drafts, and professors' comments on students' drafts. Perhaps one of the Rollins peer consultants' all-time favorite responses to this demanding activity was Lori's proud realization (cited above): "Me flexible? Who would have ever thought it?"

But while meaning is mediated, discourse negotiated, community built upon eclecticism, the Director of Writing Programs promotes, encourages, manages, and--ultimately--loses (or loosens) control! As s/he gives ownership away, community emerges from the demands of the reading and writing process. In short, all the splendid things which happen separately in the different contexts of reading and writing on a college campus merge and diverge and are comfortably brought together in the Writing Center. And let me share my own metaphor, as I too have learned from the Writing Center a central message of our discipline: the need to learn by <u>doing</u> that which our students must do.

> The Writing Center is a great candle, not the commercial kind, but a custom-made, hand-dipped candle. Each September when we try to light the candle, it sputters and sparks and hesitates before the wick stands straight and accepts the flame. Then, as the term moves on, the flame burns steadily, variegated, many-colored, with unexpected sparks and

> flashes, an occasional burning down, but always it burns true. It sheds a light on faces and thoughts and papers and computer screens, soft and gentle, but always searching, always illuminating, always brightening the way. Near the end of the term, many other, smaller candles have been lit at the Writing Center flame, and we join them all into a great bonfire at the end-of-term All-Nighter.
>
> Twila Yates Papay

In just such a Writing Center, the promotion of literacy through the continual negotiation of meaning encourages risk-taking in a supportive environment, allows for higher levels of shared vulnerability, leads to deeper, more dangerous writing. Such a Writing Center, of course, is no longer a support service, but an active nucleus for learning and teaching alike. If you lack such a Writing Center on your campus, I submit that you can surely make one. For more than support, more than metaphor, this Writing Center <u>is</u> our profession, vibrant, a source of our strength.

Twila Yates Papay
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